

Soldiers *Online*

Disaster Responses: America's Overnight Army

Story by MSG Bob Haskell



When the need arises, members of National Guard units across the country are prepared to roll out with a few hours notice to deal with domestic emergencies.



Florida Guard soldiers extinguish hot spots left from a recent wildfire.

SPC Jacob Pries, a combat engineer in the Iowa Army National Guard, was not surprised to hear SFC Tony Brown's voice on the telephone Wednesday night, April 18.

The Mississippi River was rising more than seven feet above its 15-foot flood stage. Gov. Tom Vilsack had called out the Guard to help civilian agencies deal with flooding that threatened Iowa's eastern communities. They needed 30 people by the next morning. Could Pries be at the state armory in Davenport by 6 a.m.?

Pries, who lives in nearby Bettendorf, reported for duty as dawn was breaking on April 19. He spent the next 36 hours filling sandbags and helping to build and reinforce levees that kept the "Father of Waters" from again becoming the mother of floods.

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A Florida Guard UH-60 helicopter is primed to launch and douse a wildfire in that state.



A California Guard Black Hawk drops a load of water on one of the many wildfires that plagued the state last year.

He was still on duty three weeks later.

In all, more than 1,200 Guard members from four upper Midwestern states pulled emergency relief duty during peak flood periods in April and May.

Their neighbors know them as ordinary citizens who live and work in cities, towns and farm communities throughout the region. But when the need arises, they're also members of National Guard units that are prepared to roll out with a few hours notice to deal with domestic emergencies.

It's called state active duty and can occur with unexpected suddenness, but disaster response also has its anticipated seasons — especially in the summer when wildfires threaten Florida, California and other kindling-dry states, and when hurricanes build off the coast of the Carolinas.

There is no off-season. Blizzards and ice storms may cripple northern



Florida Army National Guard soldiers comfort an anxious mother and her daughter after they were driven from their home by a recent wildfire.



California Guard SSG Wes Farnham escorts a family to safety after they were rescued from the ravages of El Nino in 1998.



states in winter; and floods from ice jams, melting snow and heavy spring rains may have governors calling for the Guard's help from late winter to well into May or June.

Those are the predictable emergencies.

Then there are the surprises:

- Earthquakes in the San Francisco Bay area in October 1989 and Northridge, Calif., in January 1994.
- The 1999 and 2000 riots and civil disturbances that erupted in Los Angeles, Seattle and Washington, D.C.
- The airliner that exploded and crashed into Long Island Sound in July 1996.

- The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, followed by the tornado that struck the city in 1999.

But regardless of the crisis, the National Guard is set up to quickly respond. Experienced people know who to call and what equipment is required and ready for state duty.

"You've always got a group of soldiers who are willing and able to

come in on short notice," said Tony Brown, the 834th Engineer Company operations sergeant who called Pries on April 18 after being told he had 14 hours to get 30 troops ready for flood-relief duty.

"Once you get familiar with a unit, you know who you can call," he said.

Twenty-six people reported the following morning, and the required 30 were on duty by the end of that Thursday, Brown said. All told, nearly 70 of the company's 110 soldiers served for a few days or for the duration of the task force.

The nation's 464,000 Army and Air Guard members do a lot of that duty.

In 2000, for example, Army Guard members served 200,590 man-days and Air Guard members put in another 12,306 man-days during 288 missions classified as military support for civilian authorities.

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Army Guard's Readiness Center in Arlington, Va.

How does the Guard stay ready?

"We continually train in our command, control and communications procedures," said COL Myles Deering, the Oklahoma Army Guard's deputy chief of staff for operations. "Many of our military missions apply to what we do for domestic emergencies, especially for our military police, medical people and other combat-support units."

N.C. Guard SPC Kimberly Sutherland clears debris from a road in Raleigh after Hurricane Fran in 1996.



Maine Army National Guard soldiers hauled bottles of propane gas in tracked vehicles during the ice storm of 1998.



Soldiers



National Guard soldiers lead horses out of flood waters near Tick Bite, N.C., after Hurricane Floyd.



Texas Guard CPL David E. Wilder leads SGT Kean Register (left) and LT Kenneth R. Walker through flooded Houston streets.

And, Deering acknowledged, Oklahoma Guard people have discovered the hard way that practice does make perfect.

More than 740 members served during 37 days in Oklahoma City following the April 1995 blast that struck the Murrah Federal Building and killed 168 people.

And nearly 1,000 Guard members probed for bodies, labored at the city morgue and kept damaged homes secure from looters after the 300-mph winds of a half-mile wide tornado tore a 140-mile path through Oklahoma City's surrounding communities in May 1999.

Those events, Deering said, reinforced the importance of maintaining close ties with municipal leaders, state and county police forces, local Red Cross chapters and state emergency management officials.

This does not mean that the Guard can be all things to all people during a crisis. Army Guard LTC Robert Betz, who works full-time in Iowa's mili-

tary-support section at state headquarters near Des Moines, is a gatekeeper who makes sure the Guard's force is properly used without being abused.

"Are you sure you need us?" "Have you used all of your own manpower and resources?" "Have you brought in volunteers?" Those are questions Betz asks civilian emergency officials before Guard troops get dispatched.

"The National Guard is not a first responder," Betz said. "But the National Guard can respond. We can stay for a long time. We will do a good job. But we're not cheap."

It costs taxpayers an average of \$135 per day for every Guard member who is on state active duty in Iowa, said Betz. That requires careful management.

One anxious county sheriff, for example, asked that 75 Guard members be sent to work on a temporary levy for two days in April, Betz recalled. A National Guard engineer officer determined that only 30 Guard members were needed for the mission.

In fact, those 30 soldiers completed the mission in one day, then worked on another levy around Davenport's water-treatment plant the following day, Betz said.

There are two reasons why civilians insist "we need the Guard" when a crisis comes calling:

- Guard people know their home turf.

"We've been there so many times in the past," Betz explained. "We can count on having to send troops and equipment to Marquette and Camanche and Davenport when the Mississippi floods. Our people know where to go in Hamburg when the Missouri River floods."

- Guard people want to serve.

SFC Ron Wubben is a construction worker and Guard engineer who remained on state active duty in Davenport from April 19 until the troops pulled out after Mother's Day.

"It's our home, and it's part of our mission," he said. "We take it to heart." □

In Oklahoma City in May 1999, Guard soldiers search for victims of an F-5 tornado.



Iowa Guard engineers check a temporary levy that kept the Mississippi River from flooding Davenport in April and May.

